

Freedom of the Press

Cuba has the most restrictive laws on free speech and press freedom in the Americas. The constitution prohibits private ownership of media outlets and allows free speech and journalism only if they “conform to the aims of a socialist society.” Article 91 of the penal code prescribes lengthy prison sentences or death for those who act against “the independence or the territorial integrity of the state,” and Law 88 for the Protection of Cuba’s National Independence and Economy imposes up to 20 years in prison for acts “aimed at subverting the internal order of the nation and destroying its political, economic, and social system.” Cuba’s legal and institutional structures are firmly under the control of the executive branch. Laws criminalizing “enemy propaganda” and the dissemination of “unauthorized news” are used to restrict freedom of speech under the guise of protecting state security. Insult laws carry penalties of three months to one year in prison, with sentences of up to three years if the president or members of the Council of State or National Assembly are the objects of criticism. The 1997 Law of National Dignity, which provides for prison sentences of 3 to 10 years for “anyone who, in a direct or indirect form, collaborates with the enemy’s media,” is aimed at independent news agencies that send their material abroad.

In recent years the government has undertaken a number of small gestures that indicate potential for a narrow media opening. In October 2012, the country announced that it would end the requirement, in place since 1961, that citizens obtain an exit visa before traveling abroad. Under the new regulations, which took effect in January 2013, citizens need only a passport and a visa for the country of destination. Nevertheless, passports are still issued at the government’s discretion and can be withheld for state-defined “reasons of public interest.” The lifting of travel restrictions made it possible for high-profile dissident blogger Yoani Sánchez to travel abroad after authorities had denied her an exit visa 20 times in the previous five years. Sánchez undertook an 80-day tour through Europe and the Americas, during which she faced protests by Cuban government sympathizers in Brazil and Mexico who accused her of being a traitor and alleged that her tour was funded by the U.S. government.

In 2013, independent or critical Cuban journalists and bloggers continued to suffer harassment for their reporting on topics deemed sensitive by the government. Such harassment took the form of arbitrary short-term detentions, internal deportations, house arrest, “public repudiations,” demotions, and the blocking of individuals’ mobile-telephone service by the state telecommunications company, ETECSA. However, with fewer major events on the island—such as Pope Benedict XVI’s visit in 2012—such sanctions occurred less frequently in 2013 than in previous years.

In April, journalist Calixto Martínez Arias was released after being detained for seven months. Martínez, who had often been harassed by state authorities over the years, was arrested on charges of insulting the president in September 2012, but was never officially charged or tried; he had earlier reported on dengue and cholera outbreaks in the country. José Antonio Torres, a former journalist with the Communist Party newspaper *Granma*, remained in prison throughout 2013. He had been detained in 2011 and sentenced in July 2012 to 14 years in prison for spying after he published articles about the mismanagement of a construction project in Santiago and a fiber-optic cable laid between Cuba and Venezuela in 2011. In February 2013, writer and blogger Ángel Santiesteban Prats began serving a five-year prison sentence for assault and trespassing. He alleged that the charges were fabricated by the authorities in retribution for his blog, *Los Hijos Que Nadie Quiso* (*The Children Nobody Wanted*), which is critical of the government.

In May, Roberto Zurbano, the director of a state-run cultural institute, was demoted and criticized in government-controlled outlets after publishing an op-ed in the *New York Times* that discussed continued inequality and prejudice against Afro-Cubans. In October, five independent journalists were arrested in Havana: Mario Echevarría Driggs of *Misceláneas de Cuba*; David Águila Montero of the Independent Journalists' Social Agency (ASPI); and William Cacer Díaz, Denis Noa Martínez, and Pablo Morales Marchán, all of Hablemos Press. All five were released after being held for several days.

The government owns virtually all traditional media except for a number of underground newsletters. It operates three national newspapers, four national television stations, six national radio stations, and one international radio station, in addition to numerous local print and broadcast outlets. All content is determined by the government. In October 2013, new and less hard-line editors were assigned to head the country's two major newspapers, *Granma* and *Juventud Rebelde* (the paper of the Communist Party's youth wing), as part of the Cuban government's self-described process of promoting generational renewal to modernize the country's "triumphalist" and "apologetic" media, in the words of President Raúl Castro. In January 2013, the government permitted the broadcasting of Venezuelan news channel Telesur on the island. While the channel does not criticize the Cuban government, it does give viewers a look into the outside world. Cubans do not have the right to possess or distribute foreign publications, although some international papers are sold in tourist hotels. Private ownership of electronic media is also prohibited. The Roman Catholic Church is permitted to publish two magazines, *Espacio Laical* and *Palabra Nueva*, which are occasionally critical of the government.

Nearly 26 percent of Cubans had access to the internet in 2013. However, the majority of users can reach only a closely monitored Cuban intranet consisting of an encyclopedia, e-mail addresses ending in ".cu" that are used by universities and government officials, and a few government news websites. The penetration rate for real access to the global internet is estimated to be around 5 percent, with users often relying on black-market channels. For the average Cuban, access to the global internet comes through outdated dial-up technology and is in many cases limited to e-mail. In 2013, the government attempted to expand access by creating 118 "internet salons" on the island where users could access the medium—though rates were set at \$4.50 an hour, prohibitively expensive in a country where the average monthly salary is \$20. In addition, users at the salons must show identification and sign a pledge not to engage in "subversive" activities online. Twitter is accessible to a small number of Cubans via mobile phones or so-called speak-to-tweet platforms, in which residents may anonymously call a phone number in the United States and leave a message that will be turned into a tweet. However, this platform costs about \$1.20 per tweet. Faster internet connections are available at tourist hotels and foreign embassies, which many independent journalists take advantage of, though this is technically illegal. The regime threatens anyone accessing the internet illegally with five years in prison, and the sentence for writing articles deemed "counterrevolutionary" for foreign websites is up to 20 years. However, the authorities do not have the means to engage in systematic filtering.

It had been hoped that the \$70 million ALBA-1 fiber-optic cable project between Cuba and Venezuela would improve internet access, particularly by increasing connection speeds. While the status of the cable was long unknown, Renesys, a U.S. firm that monitors internet traffic, noted in February 2013 that it had begun to show activity. Despite the difficulties in gaining unfettered internet access, there is a small but increasingly vibrant blogging community, with more than 70 independent bloggers working in the country.

2014 Scores

Press Status

Not Free

Press Freedom Score

(0 = best, 100 = worst)

90

Legal Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

28

Political Environment

(0 = best, 40 = worst)

34

Economic Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

28